

The fairness that Toyota is owed

by Haley Barbour

When I announced three years ago that Toyota would open a U.S. vehicle assembly plant in Blue Springs, Miss., I said Toyota was the world's premier automobile manufacturer. I still believe that.

Make no mistake, the safety and reliability concerns identified in some Toyota automobiles — although they occur very infrequently — are serious. It seems to me, however, that the company is doing everything it should as quickly as possible to make things right. This includes not just a full recall but also temporarily halting production in five plants to focus on the problem and repairing recalled vehicles. The company has taken significant steps to improve quality and reliability worldwide, and to increase the transparency of its communications with government officials and customers.

But as two House committees and one in the Senate prepare for hearings on Toyota's safety issues, I worry that there has been a rush to judgment. The way that Congress and the Obama administration respond to this controversy will have real economic consequences.

We cannot lose sight of the company's importance to America's economy — and should not ignore its continued commitment to doing things the right way. Although Toyota was founded in Japan more than 70 years ago, after five decades of doing business in the United States it is as much an "American" car company as any other.

In Mississippi, the automaker is investing \$1.3 billion to build a Prius assembly plant that will provide good jobs to more than 2,000 new Toyota team workers plus some 2,500 supplier jobs. Though the economic downturn has delayed the start of production, Toyota is honoring its financial commitments to the state — including a promised annual donation of \$5 million for the next 10 years to help fund local education programs. That's the kind of company Toyota is.

Across America, Toyota — together with its 1,500 dealers and 500 suppliers — has helped create more than 200,000 jobs. It operates major design, research and manufacturing operations in 10 states. Nearly half of the vehicles it sells in the States are built here. And over the past 22 years, 16 million Toyota vehicles have been made in America.

The company's direct investment in the United States exceeds \$18 billion, but it's not just American workers who profit. Eighty percent of Toyota vehicles sold in this country over the past 20 years are still on the road.

That's why I hope Congress will resist the temptation to attack Toyota simply to advance the interests of its American competitors. Toyota should not be blamed implicitly for the problems of Detroit's automakers. Moreover, the decision to bail out bankrupt General Motors and Chrysler with \$60 billion from U.S. taxpayers has put Washington in an uncomfortable position. I know Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood to be an honorable man, but can these hearings be seen as impartial, focused on enforcing the rules and policing corporate behavior, when the federal government has stakes in two major car companies?

Lawmakers must tread carefully lest they give Chrysler, in which the government has a 10 percent stake, or General Motors, in which the government now owns a majority stake, an unfair advantage.

Washington's primary role should be to work with Toyota to protect consumers and assist in getting problems fixed as quickly as possible. Its other responsibility is to be vigilant in pursuing fairness — Toyota cannot be unjustly punished or have its business recovery impeded by attempts to gain advantages for companies owned by the government.

America's openness and its reputation for fairness are what have made our economy so attractive to foreign investment — investment that will surely aid in our recovery. If Congress and the media treat Toyota differently, foreign businesses might think again before investing in Mississippi or any other state. During these hearings, excessive bashing of Toyota is likely to be interpreted as a signal that the United States is turning protectionist during these tough economic times. That would not be good for the American economy, companies located here or their workers.

The writer, a Republican, is governor of Mississippi.